

GUEST OBSERVER

By Sen. Ted Stevens



Yes on Katrina Funding No on Alaska Paying The Bill Alone

I was deeply disturbed by the open letter authored by Donna Brazile, "An Open Letter to Sen. Ted Stevens on Disaster Spending," which appeared Tuesday. I can only wish she had visited with me before writing her letter.

Ms. Brazile asks, "Can you imagine losing everything?" As a matter of fact, I can. Alaska was hit by the Good Friday earthquake in 1964, one of the worst natural disasters to ever hit our country. This 9.2-magnitude earth-

quake caused tsunamis and wiped out several of our cities, including Valdez and Seward. The town my wife and I now call home, Girdwood, was completely destroyed and had to be moved inland.

While the death toll did not reach the number of fatalities caused by Hurricane Katrina, the damage was catastrophic. Our rebuilding effort cost billions of dollars, very little of which was provided by the federal government.

I had to borrow money to rebuild my home and to continue my law practice in Anchorage. The federal government did not give us grant money; it was all loan money, which had to be repaid. We built our state from the ground up with very little federal assistance. So, yes, I understand what it is like to lose everything.

I understand the enormous task facing the residents of the Gulf Coast. It is the same challenge Alaskans faced after the Good Friday earthquake.

I support cutting spending and diverting those funds to the rebuilding efforts. I was the one who stood up in the Republican Conference and said we should cut our own cost-of-living adjustments this year. I advocated cutting spending to pay for the hurricanes with a two-thirds entitlement and one-third discretionary cut.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) and I did

not object when the Environment and Public Works Committee, chaired by Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), made its only rescission for the budget reconciliation bill. This rescission cut Alaska highway funds and was the only cut made by the committee. We agreed that in this time of crisis, it was important for Alaska to do its part.

Alaska suffers from severe storm damage along our coast, damage that threatens to destroy 18 of our native villages. I visited some of these villages this summer, and one-third of the facility that houses teachers in Shishmaref was hanging over a cliff. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has now taken staff and resources from projects helping our Alaska native villages and transferred them to the Gulf Coast.

Thus far, I think Alaskans have stepped up to the plate and done their part to aid in the recovery from this disaster. No other state has given up funding for its programs. And yet, last week, Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) suggested that we should give up additional transportation funds. I objected for several reasons.

First, Sen. Coburn's amendment, as written, would not have accomplished what he claimed it would do.

Second, singling out Alaska and asking its constituents to solely bear the burden for replacing the bridge on Lake Pontchartrain is wrong. It would have taken money from the transportation funds provided to one state, Alaska, without asking other states to contribute their fair share.

I went to Sen. Coburn when I found out

about his amendment, and I told him I was going to offer a second-degree amendment that would spread cuts across all states and have an immediate impact. By offering a second degree to Sen. Jeff Bingaman's (D-N.M.) amendment, Sen. Coburn prevented me from offering my amendment. This was an affront not only to me, but also to the people of my state.

I told Sen. Coburn that I did not come to the Senate to play games with people's lives; I came here to solve problems. Sen. Coburn apparently came here to get on radio talk shows and televised nightly news programs.

As a Senator from Alaska, I would never presume to tell Sen. Coburn what Oklahomans need. The vote last week demonstrated that 81 Senators agree with me; those who are elected to represent their states are in the best position to judge what their states need.

I agree with Ms. Brazile that funding for the Gulf Coast is needed. We all must sacrifice to make this funding available. I have told the people of Alaska that we will likely face funding cuts. I am dedicated to ensuring that the residents of the Gulf Coast have the resources they need. But these resources should not come solely at the expense of Alaskan projects and programs. I took an oath of office requiring me to protect Alaskans from shouldering an unfair share of this burden.

I want to help the residents of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas; I am simply asking for fairness. This is a national crisis, and all states should be part of the solution.

Sen. Ted Stevens is a Republican from Alaska.

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